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An Inaugural Essay on
Dysentery,
By
Jonathan B. Willauer,
Of
Chester County Pennsylvania.
1825.

In Memoriam

of

William B. Williams

of

Clinton County, New York

1888

Dysentery is a disease which generally occurs in the summer, or more particularly during the autumnal months, at the same time with intermittent and remittent fevers. It is a complaint of warm rather than cold climates, and prevails more frequently in the country, than in large cities.

This disease is characterized by frequent discharges from the bowels of a mucous kind, sometimes tinged with blood, at other times, the matter voided is merely of a mucous character, constituting the morbus mucosus of some; and by others the dysenteria alba.

Dysentery is a disease, in which there is much tormina and tenesmus, frequent, though fruitless attempts at stool, in the indulgence, little being voided, and that of an unnatural appearance; It commonly consists of mucus, mixed with blood, at other times of a thin serous matter.

Natural faeces are seldom discharged at this stage of the disease, and when they do appear, they are generally in the form of scybala, of a compact texture and globular shape, corresponding with the cells of the colon, in which they probably have been formed, and have lain from the commencement of the disease.

An attack of dysentery is sometimes ushered in with slight chills, and other symptoms of pyrexia; but, most commonly by a diarrhoea, though at times, for several days previous to its commencement, obstinate costiveness, attended by flatulence and disorders of the stomach mark the approach of the disease. But, in whatever form it makes its primary appearance, it soon assumes its characteristic symptoms.

At the commencement, it is said, dysentery principally affects the stomach, and

ultimately the lower intestines.

At its commencement, we have symptoms, denoting inflammation of the internal, or mucous coat of the intestines; the disease not being cured, the muscular coat becomes involved; here, we have those very acute and lancinating pains so common in violent cases of dysentery.

When the lower part of the alimentary canal becomes inflamed, an inclination to stool is more frequent, though less abundant, in the avoidance of which considerable pain and tormina are experienced by the patient.

The matter discharged at this stage of the disease, is for the most part of a mucous kind, commingled with blood; at other times somewhat resembling the washings of putrid meat, and of a highly offensive smell. Although not a common occurrence, it does occasionally

happen that pure and unmixed blood is discharged in considerable quantity; at other times a coagulated mucus, resembling small bits of cheese being combined with the excrementitious matter discharged.

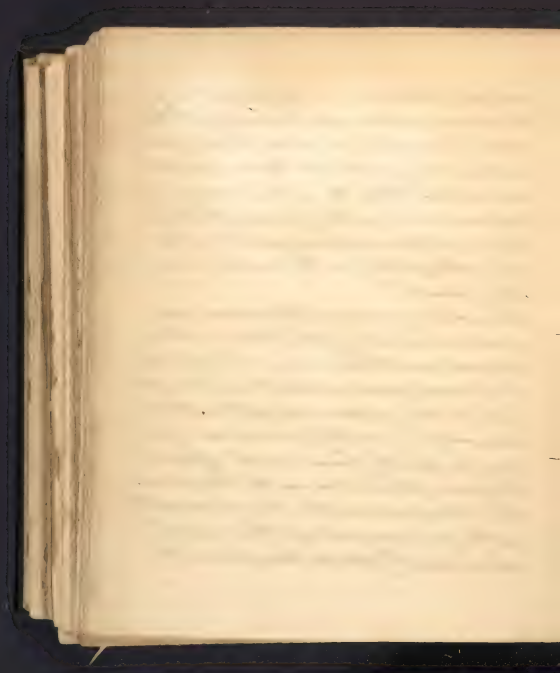
Intermittent and remittent fevers, often occur at the same time with dysentery, with which it is sometimes complicated; it also assumes the typhus character, and to this we must impute the many unmanageable and fatal cases of this disease.

Associated with the foregoing circumstances, this disease may terminate in various ways. It sometimes gradually disappears, after the judicious employment of the appropriate means; the stools becoming natural, the tormina, with the tenesmus entirely disappearing. In other cases, the disease after continuing a considerable length of time, becomes chronic as it is

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generally called; or in a less frequent way, the disease subsides spontaneously; at other times it terminates in a severe attack of rheumatism, being as it were thrown upon the extremities. When the inflammatory symptoms are violent, or the pyrexia approaches that of a typhus nature, dysentery often terminates fatally in the course of a very short period.

The ordinary causes of this disease are crude and acrid ingesta, taken into the stomach, and those causes, which give rise to autumnal fevers; sudden transitions from heat to cold, or from dryness to a state of humidity. Dysentery is a disease originating frequently from marsh effluvia, and from peculiarities in the atmosphere. When thus produced, the stomach evidently is the primary seat of the disease which finally extends its influence to



the large intestines.

Consulting the histories of this disease; we are taught, that there exists a very intimate connection between rheumatism and some of the complaints of the alimentary canal, and which is more particularly the case with dysentery: & here a translation in the form of rheumatism thrown as it were upon the extremities, never fails for the time to relieve the complaint.

The actual condition of the parts affected by the above causes, and upon which most of the symptoms depend, appears to be an inflammatory state of the internal coat, lining the primæ viæ, more especially the large intestines; combined with this, there exist uncontrollable spasms of the muscular coat of the colon, which become a preventive to a regular peristaltic motion, & evacuation from the bowels.



As might be anticipated, post mortem examinations, reveal the existence of violent inflammation, and its consequences, such as thickening of the coats of the colon, & rectum, ulceration and sometimes gangrene.

In forming our prognosis in this disease, we should be very circumspect, as cases apparently desperate, sometimes terminate favourably. We may, generally, look upon the patient as being in the greatest danger, after the administration of the appropriate measures; the tormina and tenesmus continuing to increase, with a weak and intermitting pulse; the countenance of a ghastly appearance, a sudden cessation of pain, cold extremities, hiccups; sore throat, involuntary stools &c, mark the approach of death. Dysentery in some respects resembles diarrhoea, though it

may be distinguished from it, by the fever which attends it, by the tenesmus, by the feculent matter discharged, being always combined with blood, which does rarely occur in diarrhoea.

Treatment.

Dysentery being a disease of an inflammatory type, the indications of cure become sufficiently obvious. Our first object should be to remove the inflammation, together with the morbid irritation and spasmodic action; to procure natural evacuations from the bowels, and to restore to the skin its usual healthy function. Called to a case of dysentery under ordinary circumstances, it will be proper to abstract blood, and in full habits where inflammatory symptoms run high, it should be drawn in considerable amount; the operation being repeated as often as the state of the system may seem to demand.



To dysentery occurs in our climate under ordinary circumstances, it may safely be laid down as a general rule, to precede all other remedies by the liberal employment of the lancet, as an indispensable prelude to the rest of the treatment; which, in the words of a highly distinguished professor; "precedes all other means in awakening susceptibility to remedial impression."

Now and then, however, we meet with cases of dysentery, attacking persons whose systems at the time were in a state of great debility, arising from previous disease; and a disposition to assume a typhoid condition; here circumspection in the use of bloodletting becomes necessary.

In cases of much gastric irritation, nausea, and an inclination to vomit, with accumulation of bile; the administration of an emetic is called for; and this is particularly requisite with



the dysentery arising in miasmatic districts, combined with the intermittent type of fever. And for this purpose, the tartarized antimony appears to be best adapted to the case; but, when a milder one will answer, the ipecacuanha will be most appropriate.

The principal object, which yet remains to be attained in a case of dysentery, after having effected this much, is thoroughly to evacuate the intestinal canal. And to effect this intention, castor oil is the medicine most generally employed. Mercurial purges have, of late, been highly recommended at this stage of the disease; but more emphatically insisted on by Dr Chapman, therefore, I cannot do better than cite his own language. "As regards our dysenteries, especially such as occur in warm weather, I cannot help maintaining the opinion, that mercurial purges are infinitely better adapted to the



treatment. "Do we not find them preferable whenever evacuations are demanded; we give them in bilious fevers, and we should strongly recommend them in the case before us?"

To succeed the mercurial medicines, nothing perhaps is preferable to castor oil, or opium salts given as circumstances may demand, and should be continued until natural evacuations are produced.

If the pain be distressing, we should resort to opiates, and when administered in the evening most benefit is obtained from their use; as sleep during that time appears more salutary and restorative, than that during the day.

In conjunction with the above treatment, anodyne injections, consisting of opium dissolved in mucilage of gum arabic, or flax seed tea, or a decoction of starch,



are at times better retained, and, of course, prove more effectual, than medicines given by the mouth.

Like most other diseases partaking of the nature of autumnal fevers, dysentery is accompanied with a stricture of the extreme vessels, and a consequent suppression of perspiration; and when sweating takes place from the natural effort of the system, it appears to be of a morbid nature, and does not relieve, but aggravates the symptoms.

It, therefore, becomes an indication of the first importance to restore this function to a healthy condition; and to effect this purpose, we shall find few remedies to compare with opium, calomel, and ipecacuanha, given in the following combination.

R^y. Opium, . . . gr, ij.

Calomel, gr, xij.

Spiceacuantha, gr, ss. ℥.

To be made into eight pills or powders,
one of which is to be taken every three or
four hours as circumstances may require.

The articles thus exhibited, will have the
effect of restoring the healthy action of the
skin, by producing a relaxation of the
surface of the body, and a moderate dia-
phoresis generally ensues.

Should this fail to produce the intended
effect, the Dover's powder may be used as
a more certain and powerful diaphoretic,
and seldom fails to produce a copious
perspiration. But, under ordinary circum-
stances, it should never be preferred to
the aforesaid combination, especially
when an evacuation of the bowels appears
to be demanded.

To answer similar ends, ipecacuanha has been employed for upwards of half a century, in all parts of the world, and has almost uniformly gained the approbation of the practitioners, by whom it had been employed. Several modes of exhibiting this article has been recommended by different writers, and the one most entitled to confidence, appears to be that, in which it is given in small and repeated doses.

It is said to be useful in every form of dysentery, but more particularly in those cases where there is much tormina, and a frequent desire to stool, in the indulgence of which little is bided.

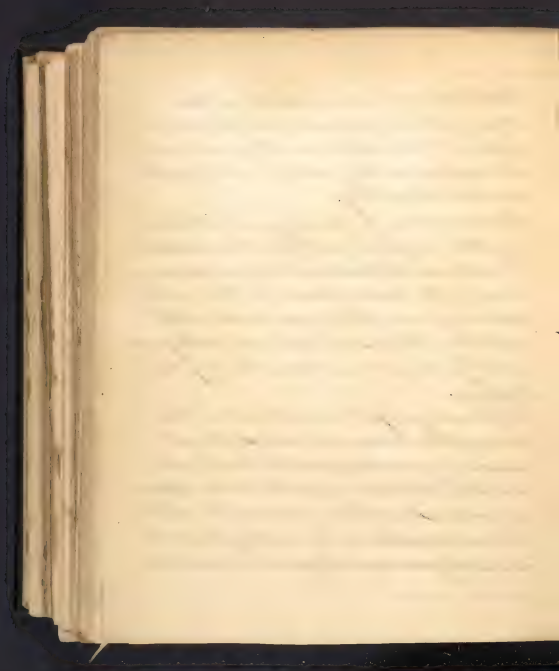
In conjunction with the above means, in cases where there is much spasmodic uneasiness, the employment of fomentations, will be of use, also the warm bath will be of great importance.



Blisters are indispensable in this stage of the complaint, and should be applied to the abdomen. They will subdue inflammatory action and lessen the morbid irritability.

In some cases of dysentery, notwithstanding the employment of all our remedies, it continues unbroken; the fever assuming more of the hectic character, the mouth becoming sore, the tongue covered with aphthae, the pulse small and feeble, great debility, tormina and tenesmus very distressing.

The primary object to be attained at this crisis of the disease, is to remove the yet remaining matter from the bowels with as little irritation as possible to the inflamed parts. To meet this indication the mildest means should be employed, such as mucilaginous, or oleaginous drinks, also



castor oil combined with oil of turpentine,
or with the tincture of rhubarb alternated
to suit circumstances.

To allay the tormina and tenesmus, which
is generally alarming at this stage of the
disease, the oleagenous mixture is high-
ly recommended composed as follows.

Rx.

Castor oil. — $\frac{3}{4}$ ij.
Gum arabic. $\frac{3}{4}$ i.
Loaf Sugar. $\frac{3}{4}$ i.
Laudanum. 80 gtt.
Mint water. $\frac{3}{4}$ iv. M.

of which a table spoonful is to be given
every two or three hours. In some cases
the cretaceous Julap may be employed
with much advantage, also mild in-
jections, such as flay-suet tea, or mut-
ton broth; but one of decidedly superior
merit in allaying the tormina and



tenesmus, is an injection composed of melted butter, free from salt and rancidity. It should be used in a tepid state in the quantity of from half to one pint, thrown up the rectum every hour or two. To effect a cure in a case of dysentery, it is quite obvious, that great attention should be directed to the diet, a selection of articles easy of digestion, and such as are least irritating and offensive to the stomach.

The most appropriate for this purpose are the demulcent preparations, as barley water, rice water, mucilage of slippery elm, sago, panada, arrow root boiled in milk, or light broths made of animal Jellies; the latter article, however, is only admissible in cases where convalescence has considerably advanced. The treatment which we have indicated,



will be proper only, to meet the first or inflammatory stage of this complaint.

Modified by particular circumstances, such as distemperature of the atmosphere, or crowded places, as hospitals, jails, ships, and camps, it is said, dysentery evidences originally, or acquires, through its subsequent progress the characteristics of typhus fever. The proper treatment under such circumstances will be that, best adapted to alleviate intestinal symptoms, and the ordinary means used in the other low stages of the disease.

At its commencement an emetic appears to be demanded; and after the bowels have been gently opened, we must resort to the use of cordial and stimulating medicines, as volatile alkali, opium, and wine &c. or the following preparation, as recommended by Doctor Chapman.



Ry Sp: Turbith: ʒi.

Carb: ammo: gr. ij.

Pulv: opi: gr. ʒ. .℥. and

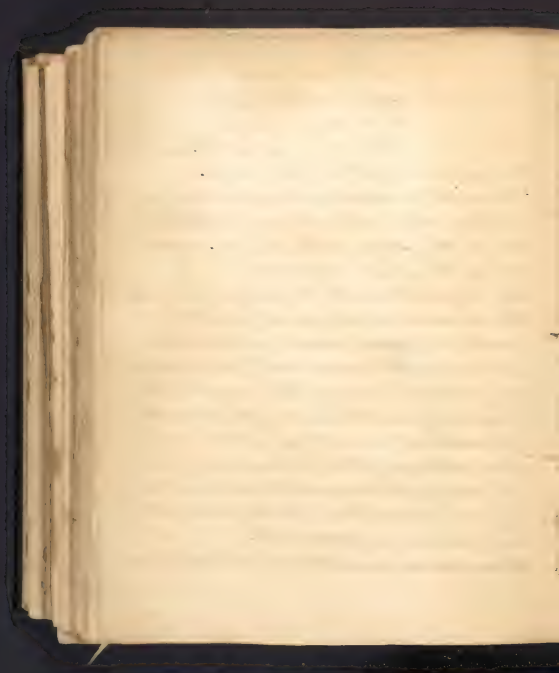
to be given every three or four hours.

It might be expected the application of blisters, either to the abdomen or extremities, in this stage of the disease, is said to be of the first importance.

In conjunction with the foregoing means, the administration of mercury, until a gentle ptyalism ensues, is recommended to be of the utmost utility in lingering and protracted cases of this complaint.

Dysentery is at times complicated with intermittent fever, though of rare occurrence with us, yet it is occasionally seen attacking persons, who had been residing in miasmatic districts, where intermittent fever was prevalent.

Consulted in a case thus complicated, we



are taught to over-look the fever, until the original disease be effectually cured; then resort to the ordinary measures proper to cure a case of this disease.

Dysentery, at times, in spite of our utmost endeavours, marches onwards, until the patient becomes very languid, followed by small frequent, and painful mucous discharges from the bowels, the skin dry, parched and very scallow, the eyes sunk, and cold extremities. The principal object in such cases, is to produce a moderate determination to the surface of the body, by the use of Tavers powder, and moderate friction.

It is, at this period, that the flannel roller, passed round the abdomen with some degree of tightness, has been so highly recommended. By some practitioners the roller is said to be of service



in the decline of the acute stage of dysentery; but it has been more highly recommended in the chronic species of this disease; from its given support to the intestines, and promoting perspiration.

When we reflect upon the intimate connection, there exists between the intestines, and that elaborate organ the liver, and the control it holds in so high a degree over the motions of the alimentary canal; we cannot but suspect, that too little attention has, hitherto, been directed to this organ in chronic cases of dysentery.

It is in such cases, that this complicated machinery, the biliary apparatus, sometimes becomes involved, particularly in miasmatic districts where bilious fever is prevalent; it necessarily follows, that this mixed state of derangement, must greatly contribute to the pre-existing chain of diseased action,

by forming links more difficult to be broken, which can, only, be subdued by disengagement, and the energetic enforcement of the most appropriate remedies.

The medicine, that would seem best adapted to meet this intention, is calomel given in small and repeated doses, sometimes combined with a small portion of opium. Calomel in such cases appears to act on a two fold principle, by changing the morbid condition of the intestines and hepatic secretions, and by its direct, purgative properties.

The patient during the convalescence, being very liable to a relapse, should, therefore, obviate this danger, by warmly clothing himself with flannel, next to the skin, by moderate exercise in the open air, and by the strictest observance of every other means, that will contribute to maintain the healthy action of the system.

